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ABSTRACT

Academic training programs in the field of outdoor education and recreation have increased considerably in the past few decades, but their true costs are often hidden. A survey of 15 outdoor college programs in the United States and Canada examined special fees associated with outdoor courses. The cost of necessary personal equipment and clothing was also researched by surveying 30 outdoor adventure education majors to determine the equipment needed and then pricing those items at three national outdoor equipment resale stores. Finally, the average cost of wilderness first aid certification was determined, based on 12 available certification courses. Only one institution did not charge additional fees for outdoor courses. At the other 14 colleges, additional fees ranged from $75 to $2,625, while the average additional cost per credit was $8-171. The students surveyed selected 26 equipment and garment items as "most needed" from a list of 111 items. The total cost of the 26 items was $1,795, and most were already owned by respondents. The cost of wilderness first aid certification averaged $570. These extra costs seem excessive in a field where entry-level salaries for college graduates fall below the national average. The roots of the problem lie in the field's nontraditional origins and the biased perceptions of academic departments about outdoor experiences. Solutions might involve outside funding or lobbying to expand coverage by departmental budgets; either option has ethical and programming consequences. (SV)

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# The Hidden Costs of Outdoor Education/Recreation Academic Training

Christian Bisson, Ed.D.

14th Annual International Conference on Outdoor Recreation & Education

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RC 023 584

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# THE HIDDEN COSTS OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION/RECREATION ACADEMIC TRAINING

**Christian Bisson, Ed.D.**

**ABSTRACT:** Over the past few decades, the field of outdoor education and recreation has seen a considerable increase in academic training programs. While these programs are serving thousands of aspiring young professionals, the true cost associated with these programs are often hidden. With training costs and required technical personal equipment, studying to become an outdoor educator does not come at low price. When the average entry level salaries in our field are considerably below the average expected salaries for a baccalaureate degree, we have to question the way we administer our outdoor education/recreation training programs. This paper will reveal the hidden costs of our academic training programs by presenting data collected through a survey of outdoor education/recreation training institutions. The author also offers potential solutions to these financial challenges.

## Statement of the Problem

Course fees are often hidden in many academic programs. From nursing to fine arts, students are required to take classes for which they not only have to pay tuition for credits, but they also have to pay special course fees (a.k.a. lab fees). These financial surcharges are often concealed until class registration, and after a while, become accepted by many students. Outdoor education and recreation majors are not exempt from this reality. On the contrary, most academic training programs in outdoor education and recreation are successful at presenting field based courses because of additional course fees. Due to a lack of or a limited operational budget for transportation, special equipment, federal land permits, or consumable products like food, fuel, and medical supplies, outdoor education and recreation programs have quietly passed the bill on to the students.

In addition, to these hidden costs, one should not forget to add the cost of basic outdoor equipment and technical garments that are often needed to participate in field based classes or to practice newly acquired skills. From a simple pair of wool socks to a three season sleeping bag, personal outdoor equipment quickly increases the cost of studying outdoor education/recreation. Finally, since the industry now requests current first aid certification, students in outdoor education/recreation are often compelled to take a Wilderness First Responder (WFR) course from a certifying body. This certification brings an additional cost that is not often clearly spelled out in college curricula.

Since we know that the average entry level annual salaries in our field for full time employment ($18,000 - $21,000)[1] are considerably below the average expected annual

[1] Data compiled from AEE Job Clearing House, January 1997 through January 1999.

salaries for a baccalaureate degree ($26,300 - $32,000)[2], we have to question the way we administer our outdoor education/recreation training programs. This research looks at the extent of this problem by analyzing three contributing factors: (1) academic programs' additional costs for special course fees, (2) the cost of basic outdoor equipment and technical garments, and (3) the cost for WFR certification.

**Research Methodology**

Academic Program Survey

In March 2000, 36 academic institutions were sent a letter explaining the purpose of the study. Each institution was asked to voluntarily provide (1) a copy of the most recent class requirement for students majoring in outdoor education or recreation with an emphasis in outdoor adventure activities, and (2) a copy of a document listing any special course fees associated with the required or potential elective courses.

15 institutions returned the requested information for a return rate of 41.6 %. Of these institutions, 13 were from the United States and two were from Canada. Nine were State or Provincial institutions while 6 were private colleges. The majority (14) of the respondents were 4 year baccalaureate institutions, only one institution was a 2 year preparatory college.

For each institution, a minimum and maximum cost for special course fees was established according to their respective program requirement. An average of course fee cost per credit was then computed for each institution.

Average Cost of Basic Outdoor Equipment and Technical Garment

For this part of the research, an exhaustive list (111 items) of potential basic outdoor equipment and technical garments was established based upon the researcher's personal experience. The list was distributed to 30 outdoor adventure education majors to determine a list of most needed items. The items receiving at least 51% of the student votes were priced based on an average price from three national US outdoor equipment resale stores (i.e., REI, Campmore, EMS). The total cost of the most needed equipment from the list was then computed.

Average Cost for WFR Certification

The cost of 12 WFR certification courses were averaged by randomly taking four courses from Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS, four courses from Wilderness Medical Associates, and four courses from SOLO for the 1999-2000 academic year.

**Data**

Academic Program Survey

Institutions participating in this research were promised confidentiality. Therefore, an identification number – from 1 to 15 – has been allocated to each institution. For each

[2] Data taken from Recruiting Trends 1998-1999, Michigan State University

responding institution, a maximum and a minimum additional cost for completing their respective outdoor education or recreation program was calculated. All additional costs came from the summation of lab fees or special course fees. Table 1 presents the maximum and minimum additional costs as well as their respective average cost per credit.

It is interesting to note that only one institution (see #15) does not require additional costs for outdoor skill classes. The respondent indicated that, "Departmental budgets must cover fees for trips and equipment." This type of management seems to be an exception to the common practice in academic outdoor education/recreation training programs.

Maximum and minimum course fees existed for almost half of the responding institutions because their academic program offered required options with occasionally drastic differences in additional course fees. For instance, institution #2 offered the option to either take three outdoor pursuit classes focusing respectively on land, water, and snow at $30.00 per class, or participate in a Wilderness Education Association course or an Outward Bound course. This last option would obviously bring an additional cost of $1000 to $2000. Although more expensive, this type of option is often preferred by students because it offers a more intense experiential approach to skill development.

Figure 1 presents a comparative chart of maximum and minimum additional course fees. While Figure 2 presents a comparative chart of maximum and minimum average cost per credit. In Figure 1, we can see how much additional costs differed throughout the responding institutions. For example, additional costs range greatly from over $2,500.00 to $75.00 (not including Institution #15). Even though it seems that some outdoor education/recreation programs are passing the bulk of the cost on to the students, it is important to look at the number of credits obtained through these programs. Figure 2 gives us a better idea of which institution gives you the most for your dollar. For instance, institution #1 charges the students a high additional cost but also offers in return many credits which on average will cost the student only $38.00 a credit. Comparatively, institution #10 requires only an additional $500.00, but their cost per credit is twice as much as institution #1 (i.e., $83.00).

Table 1

Maximum and Minimum Additional Cost[3] and Respective Average Cost per Credit

| Institution | Max. Cost | Min. Cost | Max. Average Cost per Credit | Min. Average Cost per Credit |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1* | $2,625 | $2,125 | $38.60 | $37.95 |
| 2 | $2,060 | $95 | $171.67 | $7.92 |
| 3* | $1,805 | $1,755 | $36.10 | $35.10 |
| 4 | $950 | $880 | $19.39 | $18.72 |
| 5* | $850 | $600 | $106.25 | $85.71 |
| 6 | $806 | $602 | $53.73 | $50.17 |
| 7* | $680 | $220 | $45.33 | $18.33 |
| 8 | $675 | $675 | $75.00 | $75.00 |
| 9 | $670 | $670 | $60.91 | $60.91 |
| 10* | $500 | $480 | $96.00 | $83.33 |
| 11* | $455 | $455 | $65.00 | $65.00 |
| 12 | $369 | $369 | $41.00 | $41.00 |
| 13 | $214 | $214 | $9.30 | $9.30 |
| 14 | $75 | $75 | $8.33 | $8.33 |
| 15 | $0 | $0 | $0.00 | $0.00 |

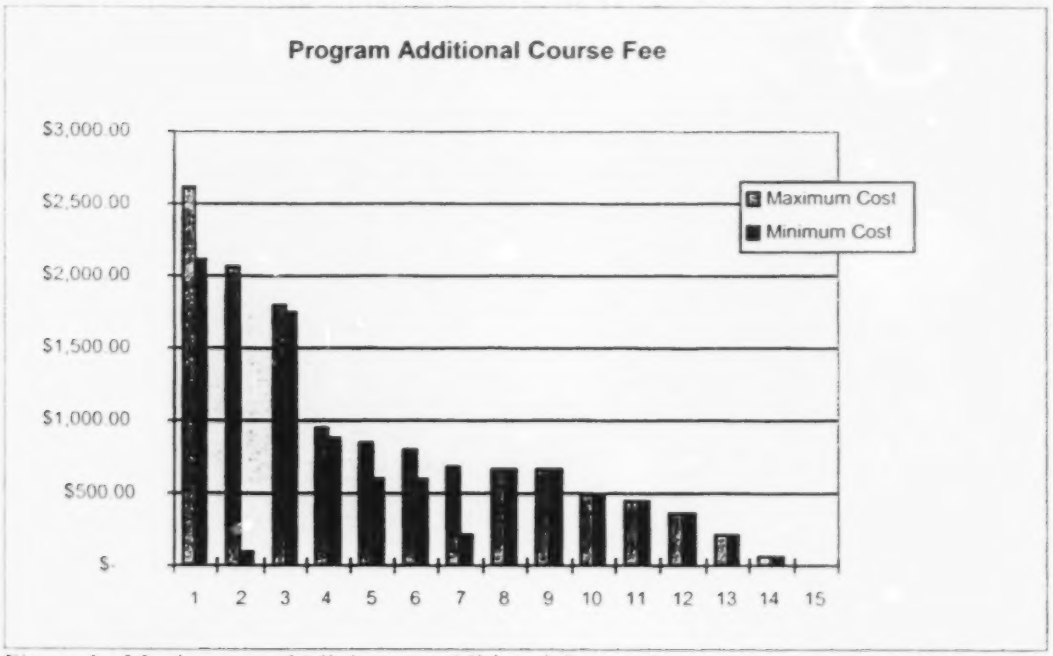


Figure 1. Maximum and Minimum Additional Course Fee.

[3] All costs are presented in US dollars.

* Private Colleges

Although these data give us a better picture of the role additional course fees are playing in the academic training of outdoor education and recreation students, it does not provide a complete picture of the financial stress experienced by these students. To get a more accurate financial picture, we must also look at the average cost of basic outdoor equipment and technical garments that these programs often expect students to own or acquire during their academic training.

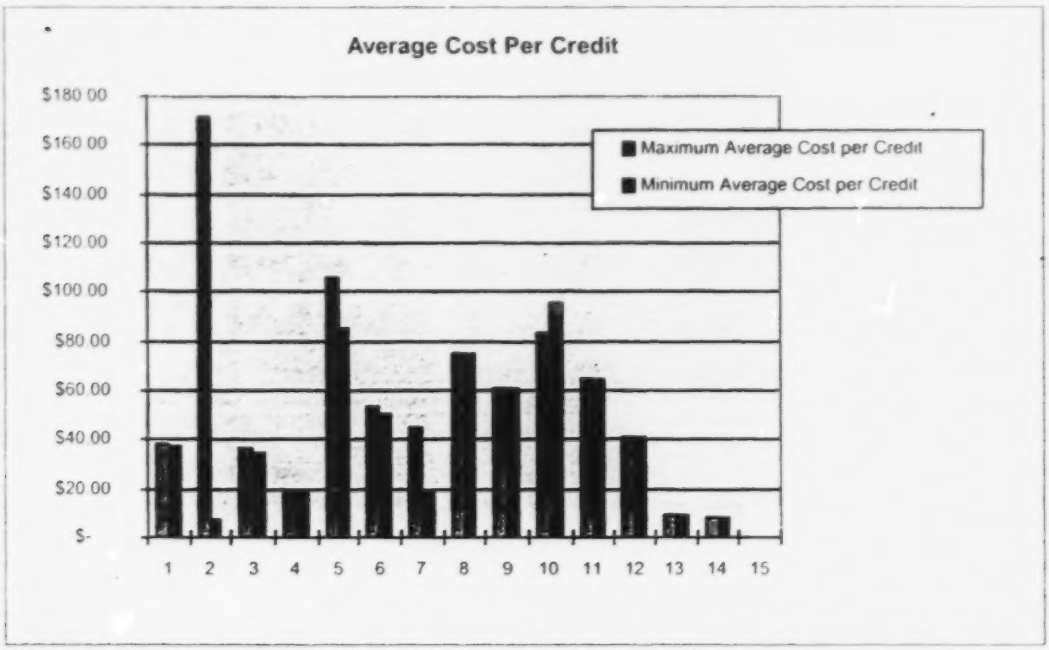


Figure 2. Maximum and Minimum Average Cost per Credit.

Average Cost of Basic Outdoor Equipment and Technical Garment

From wool socks to a personal first aid kit, 26 pieces of outdoor equipment or personal technical garments (see Table 2) were selected by more than 50% of students who responded to the "Most Needed Basic Outdoor Equipment and Technical Garment Survey."

The total cost adds up to $1795.45. This is a conservative figure that does not take into account peripheral cost such as sale taxes or shipping charges. One could argue that a young professional could easily spend $2000.00 to acquire all the basic equipment and garments needed to go camping or to practice classic outdoor activities such as rock climbing, canoeing, or cross-country skiing.

Although the 26 items selected as "most needed" by the student sample represent only 23 % of the 111 items mentioned in the survey, it is important to notice that most of the 26 items were owned (see percentage of ownership in Table 2) by the respondents (78% on average). This finding implies that students in outdoor education or recreation programs are already accumulating essential and expensive pieces of equipment or technical garments.

Adding this hidden price tag to the expenses generated by special course fees brings up a new perspective on the true cost of becoming an outdoor educator. However, we still need to add another hidden cost to this already expensive endeavor. Wilderness First Responder (WFR) certifications are increasingly perceived to be a basic requirement for hiring and therefore should be added to the total cost of becoming an outdoor educator.

Table 2
Most Needed Basic Outdoor Equipment and Garment

| | Items | Average Price | Percentage of Ownership |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Wool Socks (4 pairs) | 43.92 | 96% |
| 2. | Hiking Boots | 191.33 | 96% |
| 3. | Light Weight Bottom Underwear | 21.65 | 82% |
| 4. | Light Weight Top Underwear | 22.65 | 82% |
| 5. | Medium Weight Bottom Underwear | 35.33 | 75% |
| 6. | Medium Weight Top Underwear | 35.33 | 75% |
| 7. | Heavy Weight Pile/Fleece Jacket | 118.00 | 85% |
| 8. | Wind Jacket | 175.33 | 72% |
| 9. | Wind Pants | 43.65 | 75% |
| 10. | Wool/Fleece Hat | 22.65 | 89% |
| 11. | Biking Helmet | 48.32 | 60% |
| 12. | Quick Dry Shorts | 29.65 | 81% |
| 13. | Day Pack (2000 - 3500 cu. in.) | 77.65 | 96% |
| 14. | Backpack (6000 - 7500 cu. in.) | 348.38 | 85% |
| 15. | 3 Season Sleeping Bag | 168.00 | 70% |
| 16. | Closed Cell Foam Pad | 19.93 | 66% |
| 17. | Camping Stove | 66.95 | 60% |
| 18. | Water Bottle | 6.48 | 100% |
| 19. | Water Filter | 107.38 | 60% |
| 20. | Compass | 15.94 | 81% |
| 21. | Pocket Knife | 18.65 | 100% |
| 22. | Personal Floatation Device | 48.31 | 60% |
| 23. | Carabiners (6) | 33.72 | 40% |
| 24. | Sun Glasses | 45.16 | 92% |
| 25. | Headlamp | 33.15 | 88% |
| 26. | Personal First Aid Kit | 17.94 | 81% |
| | Total $1795.45 | 78% | |

Average Cost for WFR Certification

Although some academic programs offer WFR as part of their required curriculum in outdoor education/recreation, it is often left to the student to pay for the additional cost for certification. The cost of a WFR certification from well known wilderness first aid training schools such as Wilderness Medicine Institute of NOLS, Wilderness Medical Associates, and SOLO range from $450.00 to $750.00. The considerable difference in cost can be mainly explained by the variation in overhead cost specific to each organization hosting the WFR certification.

Hence, on average, one can expect to pay around $570.00 to participate in a WFR certification course.

**Implications**

From this study, we can entertain three basic assumptions. 1) The cost of studying outdoor education/recreation in an academic institution includes a total[4] hidden cost that can vary from $2370.00 to $5000.00. 2) It is expected that outdoor education and recreation students invest in personal and technical equipment and garments prior to or during their academic training. 3) Personal skill certification such as WFR is required by most employers and therefore must be acquired and paid by students in outdoor education/recreation.

When we look at the different sources contributing to increasing the hidden costs of studying outdoor education/recreation, one could argue that personal equipment and technical garments are not only an essential expenditure, but also a professional investment in work tools. Like carpenters, outdoor educators must invest in some personal equipment or technical garments to practice their profession. Furthermore, one could argue that most often, this equipment and these garments will be used for personal recreational activities. Hence, the additional cost created by equipment and garments is self-imposed. It is the nature of our profession, a part of our culture.

Nevertheless, whether one embraces the purchase of personal equipment and garments as a positive necessity to becoming an outdoor educator, we cannot deny the fact that a financial burden is added to all students majoring in our field. If we compare the experience of students in outdoor education/recreation to students in physical education or urban recreation, we can easily estimate that outdoor education or recreation is more costly than other related fields. For example, students in physical education are not expected to buy their own basketballs or even less their own basketball hoops.

It could also be argued that the adoption of personal certification in wilderness first aid was an essential and positive development in our profession. Today one can hardily imagine letting oneself or one's child be led in the wilderness by someone with no knowledge or skills in wilderness first aid. Therefore, one could say that the cost associated with WFR certification is a logical and ethical requirement for all professional outdoor educators. Yet, it is potentially an additional cost to all students in outdoor education and recreation that none can deny.

Finally, one could argue that because most outdoor skill classes are field based they require transportation, food, special permits, and the rental of outdoor equipment, which obviously brings additional expenses. Everyone understands that any expedition encumbers some expenses. However, in most academic institutions, the additional costs

[4] Includes maximum additional course fees, equipment & garment costs, WFR cost

engendered by travel, food, special permits, and rental of equipment is obviously passed on directly to the students.

But why are we passing the bill to our students? To answer this question, we have to look at our origins. Historically, academic outdoor education and recreation programs have been developed by isolated individuals who shared a common vision of offering academic training in outdoor education or recreation. But without a solid theoretical foundation and with a misunderstood pedagogical approach, it was difficult for these pioneers to request additional funds to "go camping" as it was often perceived by their administrations and colleagues (true education was only perceived to be taking place on campus). Field based experiences or wilderness field trips were often perceived as extracurricular activities. Hence, students participating in these courses had to cover the additional expenses. One should not forget that it is only through the perseverance of the pioneering work of these educators that outdoor education/recreation was able to grow into healthy and mature majors and departments.

However, the financial strategies adopted to establish these pioneering programs are still prevalent today. Even the oldest and best established outdoor education and recreation programs are still perceiving field based courses as activities outside the traditional academic program. This perception requires us to create and offer field based courses with no departmental budget to cover transportation or the rental of special equipment. Ironically, we have become victims of our own history. We have created a precedent, which implies that outdoor field experiences are not part of a traditional academic training. In brief, we are still suffering from what I call "academic insecurity." As long as we perceive our educational approaches to be alternative or nontraditional pedagogy, we will continue to bill our students for an educational approach that is fundamental to the development of young professionals in our field.

**Potential Solutions**

I believe two solutions can be proposed. First, we can entertain solutions that involve seeking external funding to increase, or create, departmental budgets that will allow the financing of outdoor field based courses or skill classes. External funding could include state, federal, or private grants. It could also include seeking sponsorship from outdoor equipment companies, outdoor retail stores, or outdoor "dot com" companies. Obviously, these solutions might have a short-term existence in nature as well as raise some ethical issues about involving academic training with money from the private sector.

Another solution, with long-term consequences, would involve a paradigm shift in our institutional administration. It would involve lobbying to get our field based experience recognized as an integral part of our academic services. We would need to replace the generalized extracurricular "camping trip" perception with an understanding that outdoor field based experiences are simply an extension of our academic classrooms.

Operating budgets are mostly based upon tuition incomes. This money is used to pay for all costs associated with a safe and functional classroom environment, from heating and lights to maintenance and clean up. When a class leaves campus to teach rock climbing at a nearby bluff, no campus classroom or utilities are being used. In fact, academic institutions are saving money when we are off campus. I believe that we could make an argument to acknowledge that the money allocated to campus classroom services should be reallocated to off campus transportation. Few institutions are already benefiting from this free use of vans and buses for regional travel. One institution surveyed in this study offers free transportation up to 100 miles.

A similar argument could be made for purchasing special or group equipment. Like the microscopes and sampling containers in the biology labs, the tents and canoes should be provided at no cost to the outdoor education/recreation students. Equipment rentals should be available on an individual basis only. Once transportation and group equipment are being provided by the institutions, the students additional course fee might only be needed to cover consumables such as food.

Such a paradigm shift would be challenging for our administrators. But, with careful argument, it might be possible to convince our peers that what we are doing in the field is as much academic as what we are doing in the classroom.

Yet, there is a potential risk that comes with having a departmental budget. The budget could dictate what type of expedition a program could offer by limiting how far a course could go or what type of activities a wilderness expedition could do. Departmental budgets are also susceptible to generalized budgetary cuts or freezes.

**Conclusion**

Like few other majors, outdoor education and recreation students are often asked to pay additional course fees to pursue their degree. This research has shown that this cost could vary from over $2500.00 to less than $100.00. Obviously the difference between these additional costs represents a difference in how field-oriented these programs are.

Nevertheless, studying outdoor education/recreation in an academic program means spending money on course fees, personal outdoor equipment/technical garments, and first aid certification. This study suggests that this overall cost could vary from $5000.00 to $2370.00. An additional cost that seems excessive for majors who cannot expect to find a full time entry level job above the national average entry level salary.

To reduce these costs, short term and long term solutions are possible, but both options include ethical or programming consequences. In any case, it is essential that leaders in outdoor education and recreation programs take a careful look at the true cost of becoming an outdoor education/recreation specialist, and work towards reducing these costs.

**Biographical Sketch**

Dr. Christian Bisson has been involved in outdoor education since 1986. He teaches Adventure Education at Northland College and works seasonally for NOLS. Christian has presented workshops at various AEE International and Regional Conferences and received the 1997 AEE Outstanding Experiential Teacher of the Year Award.

**For further information, contact:**

Christian Bisson, ED.D.
Northland College
Department of Outdoor Education
1411 Ellis Ave.
Ashland, WI 54806
715-682-1324 (Work)
715-682-1802 (Fax)
E-mail: cbisson@northland.edu